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WRITING TO SAVE A LIFE: THE LOUIS TILL FILE

Chris Laico

Columbia University, cl880@columbia.edu

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Cover Page Footnote

1. Pound, Ezra, and Richard Sieburth. 2003. *The Pisan cantos*. New York: New Directions Books, Canto 74.170-177 at 8. 2. Wideman, John Edgar. 2016. *Writing to Save a Life: The Louis Till File*. Simon & Schuster, 4. 3. *Ibid.*, 62 and 63. 4. *Ibid.*, 17. 5. *Ibid.*, 12. 6. *Ibid.*, 93. 7. *Ibid.*, 94. 8. *Ibid.*, 97. 9. *Ibid.*, 12. 10. *Ibid.*, 22. 11. *Ibid.* 12. *Ibid.*, 98. 13. *Ibid.* 14. *Ibid.*, 99. 15. *Ibid.*, 164. 16. *Ibid.*, 165. 17. *Ibid.* 18. *Ibid.*, 177. 19. *Ibid.*, 191. 20. *Ibid.* 21. *Ibid.*, 192.

WRITING TO SAVE A LIFE: THE LOUIS TILL FILE
John Edgar Wideman. New York: Scribner, 2016.
193 pp. Hardcover. \$25.00. ISBN 978-1-5011-4728-9.

On July 3, 1945, at the U.S. Army's Disciplinary Training Center near Metato, Italy, the American poet Ezra Pound (1885-1972), composed these verses from his outdoor steel cage cell: "Pisa, in the 23rd year of the effort in sight of the tower / and Till was hung yesterday / for murder and rape with trimmings plus Cholkis / plus mythology, thought he was Zeus ram or another one / a man on whom the sun has gone down".¹ In an inexplicable incident of history, these few short lines taken from the *Pisan Cantos* memorialize the death of Pvt. Louis Till the father of civil rights martyr Emmett Till, who had been murdered, at the tender age of 14, "because he was a colored boy and had allegedly wolf-whistled a white lady."² Although suffering greatly and facing charges of treason, Pound wrote these cantos as a meditation on power in an attempt to save his own mind.³ Like Pound, John Edgar Wideman in his volume, *Writing to Save a Life: The Louis Till File* contemplates in powerful language his attempt to save himself and answer "the yearning to make some sense out of the American darkness that disconnects colored fathers from sons, a darkness in which sons and fathers lose track of one another."⁴ Through three chapters of heart rending call-and-response prose, Wideman analyzes, questions, recreates, and speculates about Pvt. Louis Till's U.S. Army file in order to investigate the machinations of governmental power and the role of truth in the use of archival records.

In the first chapter titled, "Louis Till", Wideman recounts his personal journey from the son Emmett Till to the father Louis Till. Haunted by the 1955 *Jet* magazine photograph showing the brutally beaten visage of Emmett, a boy his exact age, he planned originally to write about

¹ Pound, Ezra, and Richard Sieburth. 2003. *The Pisan cantos*. New York: New Directions Books, Canto 74.170-177 at 8.

² Wideman, John Edgar. 2016. *Writing to Save a Life: The Louis Till File*. Simon & Schuster, 4.

³ Ibid., 62 and 63.

⁴ Ibid., 17.

Mamie Till's carefree and talented child. Over the course of fifty years, therefore, he had saved newspaper clippings from the trial coverage of Till's murders. At almost every turn, however, Wideman would encounter reticent references to the silent father Pvt. Louis Till such as his partitioned Plot E prescribed for the dishonorable at Oise-Aisne American Cemetery and Memorial in France, his inglorious passing proclaimed in Pound's panegyrical psalm, and his martial silver signet ring recorded at the Sumner, Mississippi trial as on his slain son's finger. Although revisiting the trial testimony left Wideman still in darkness, without satisfactory answers. The ring did serve as a reminder to him that he, like Emmett, possessed an imperfect father.⁵ With this insight, Wideman decides to track down Pvt. Louis Till's U.S. Army file. And pursue Emmett's father for a satisfactory resolution to his questions.

Chapter two, "The File" describes Wideman's quest for answers from the record of *United States v. Louis Till (CMZ288642)*. He documents his numerous requests to obtain a copy of the file and his many attempts to gain an understanding of Louis Till from the archival record. Expecting more drama, Wideman initially detours and delays upon the arrival of the file in the mail. After a long while, however, he sits down for hours with the file mining it for any and all information about Pvt. Till. In the first few readings of the file, Wideman becomes suspicious of the order of the pages within the file. He debates: why are file pages neither numbered consecutively nor arranged chronologically?⁶ Wideman, therefore, attempts to give the file an order by penciling in his own numbers without positive results. Frustrated, he questions: who determined the sequence into which the pages had been bound? Was it the clerk, who fulfilled his request?⁷ Was it the U.S. Army officer, who on the orders of the politically powerful, broke rules, crossed out confidential and shipped Louis Till's archival remains to a hungry press and

⁵ Ibid., 12.

⁶ Ibid., 93.

⁷ Ibid., 94.

the lawyers defending his son's killers of kidnapping charges?⁸ Indeed, it was with these facts about the dishonored, disgraced Pvt. Till that the Mississippi grand jury declined to indict Emmett's executioners.⁹

Louis Till's silence, however, remains Wideman's greatest frustration about the file. The record, indicates, in fact, that Pvt. Till broke his silence only once in response to an interrogator's request for an official statement. Till allegedly stated: "There's no use in me telling you one lie and then getting up in court and telling another one."¹⁰ Wideman finds some comfort in these words, which convey to him his and Louis Till's understanding of the status of truth in the universe. All truths for Wideman and Pvt. Till "are equal until power chooses one truth to serve its needs."¹¹ Common sense, however, tells Wideman to step back and take a long view about the file.¹² He asserts that any peace of mind that he tries to cobble together is mocked by power. A smirking power that controls, displays, and deploys the record.¹³ Wideman attempts to resist the ugly reality constructed by these documents. An authenticity, he asserts, that has been damaged beyond repair.¹⁴ If the truth cannot be mended, how will Wideman save himself?

In the final chapter, "Graves", Wideman comes to an understanding that imprisoned in our memories the records in the file cannot free us.¹⁵ That the documents in the Till file are full of stories. Some evincing truth and others revealing down right lies.¹⁶ Dump the documents on the table, shake them up, he maintains, and Pvt. Louis Till is still silent and forgotten.¹⁷ No conceivable way exists to connect together the bits and pieces, to bring the documents to life, to

⁸ Ibid., 97.

⁹ Ibid., 12.

¹⁰ Ibid., 22.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 98.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 99.

¹⁵ Ibid., 164.

¹⁶ Ibid., 165.

¹⁷ Ibid.

release them from the consuming darkness in order to free the power of their detailed remains.¹⁸ Wideman affirms that he must invent new ways to address Louis Till's silences.¹⁹ He must write stories, which bestow a protective light not only on himself, but most importantly upon his black sons and black brothers. He must provide a light that guides and must assure for them a long life.²⁰ Wideman only truly makes the silent file his own by listening more deeply to the darkness inside himself and finding the light of truth in the watchful, forgiving eyes of his people, those living and those long gone.²¹ In the end, however, Wideman does succeed, because he has delivered, Zeus like lightning bolts of truth not only to his own people, but to all of us. John Edgar Wideman has written for our profession a valuable, poignant case study, which allows both archives students and teachers to investigate thoroughly the Machiavellian machinations of governmental power and to discuss fully the role of truth in the use of archival records.

Christopher M. Laico

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¹⁸ Ibid., 177.

¹⁹ Ibid., 191.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 192.